

Goa's Garden of Melody Goans in Indian Classical Music

by

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माझ्या गोव्याच्या भूमींत येते चांदणे माहेरा
ओलावल्या लोचनांनी भेटे आकाश सागरा

In Goa my land
Moonlight comes home to her mother
With moist eyes sky embraces the sea

Thus sang **Bakibab Borkar** (1910-1984), Goa's de facto poet-laureate, to the ethereal beauty of his homeland.

On another occasion, he declared [1]:

In the whole of India, Kashmir, Kamarupa, Kerala, and Konkan are supposed to be the richest in scenic beauty. I have had the good luck of drinking deep in the founts of their distinctive charm and thus have my aesthetic sense refined. But if I am to be born again and I am allowed to choose my future birth place, I shall undoubtedly opt for Goa because its great beauty has a supernatural quality of refining the human mind and turning it inward into the depths of creativity and spirituality.

With characteristic exuberance, the wordsmith nonpareil captured the essence of the Goan psyche: a fervid attachment to his soil, inseparable from his amour-propre.

Numerically insignificant in the vast quilt of India, and perhaps because of it, Goans nurture a keen sense of identity, a sui generis ethos locally known as Goenkarponn¹. This tribal solidarity, however, does not engender a narrow compass, for the Goan is accepting of his Indianness and, indeed, of the larger fellowship of man. Until the recent upheaval wrought by uncontrolled in-migration from the rest of India, *Família Goesa* has welcomed people and ideas from without, affirming the ideal in the *Rig Veda*:

Let noble thoughts come to us from all directions.

On this sacred ground of Sri Parashurama have arisen men and women of great distinction who, through the power of intellect and industry, scaled the high peaks to touch the face of Mount Kailash, baring the human spirit at its most incandescent. It is no exaggeration to say that tiny Goa's contributions to India's heritage - and to world civilisation - are as prodigious as they are incommensurate with its size. From music to literature and poetry, from painting to sculpture, from philosophy to mathematics, the Goan impress is stamped on diverse realms.

My remit is to shine the spotlight on Goan gems studded in the treasure chest of India's Art music. The lives and times of the principal architects who profoundly shaped that tradition, and their resolute quest for excellence, shall absorb us in this essay.

To present an honest account, we must first know the language of the tradition. A summary of important terms is provided in the embedded box, together with footnotes as and when additional terms arise.

¹ Goanness.

A Goan Renaissance

Centuries of Portuguese rule and benign neglect had taken a toll on Goa, draining the land of its cultural vitality. In the 18th and 19th centuries, notwithstanding the yoke of colonial rule, the North and South of India witnessed a creative surge in the sphere of music. For some reason, these Promethean winds bypassed the Arabian shores leaving Goa a cultural backwater. Musical activity was modest in scope, limited to *bhajan*² singing in Hindu temples or to the vernacular forms. Teachers of music were few, drawn mostly from the Haridas³ performers visiting from neighbouring Maharashtra.

The first musician to seek relief from Goa's parched cultural terrain was a woman named **Mohana Palkar**. Skilled in song and dance, she made bold to present herself at the Peshwa Court in Pune c. 1770. Several decades were to elapse before another Goan - **Murarba Pednekar** - ventured out to pursue formal training in classical music [2].

Murarba was born for music. What he lacked in formal training he made up with innate talent. A versatile musician, he sang well and showed an aptitude for stringed as well as percussion instruments. Driven by his natural gifts, Murarba cut loose from the stultifying atmosphere of Goa and traveled North, to Lucknow and other centres of Hindustani music,⁴ seeking out and serving *ustads*⁵ in exchange for instruction in music. He quickly advanced to become an outstanding musician admired by his peers.

² Genre of devotional music.

³ Servant of Hari (God). Refers to itinerant bards who sang verses from the scriptures.

⁴ One of the two major streams of Indian Classical music, the other being Carnatic music.

⁵ Honorific for a Muslim musician. 'Pandit' is the honorific for a Hindu musician.

In the latter half of the 19th century, **Vithoba Hadap**, a senior classical musician from Malvan, presented a recital at the ancient Mahalaxmi Temple in Bandora-Ponda. The performance had a decisive impact on aspirants in the local community, awakening in them a desire to learn this genre. Hadap was persuaded to stay back and teach in Goa.

Under Hadap's guidance, **Saraswatibai Bandodkar** emerged as the first Goan classical singer of merit to be locally trained. The enthusiasm generated by Hadap's presence was infectious. Long deprived of quality education, young boys and girls enrolled in droves. Encouraged by the enthusiastic reception accorded Hadap, other learned musicians moved to Goa to meet the rising demand.

This period saw the return of the distinguished son of the soil, Murarba Pednekar. His arrival further animated the cultural revival that was underway. Murarba, however, could not be pinned down for long. He soon left for Pune to join its active cultural life. In short order he invented an instrument and authored treatises, among them *Sangeet-Sanjeevani* published in 1897.

Bablibai Salgaonkar (1860-1925) was the brightest Goan light of the late 19th century and the first Goan woman to make a splash in Hindustani music. She was a disciple of **Nathhan Khan** (1840-1901), one of the founding *ustads* of Agra gharana⁶ [2] [3] [4].

Bablibai's early training took place in Goa and Belgaum before she moved to Bombay. It was her arduous, decade-long *taleem*⁷ under Nathhan Khan that propelled her into the ranks of the country's leading vocalists. She was considered a worthy rival to **Gauhar Jan** (1870-1929), then celebrated as India's first singing sensation of the Gramophone era. Historical accounts

⁶ See embedded box for gharana.

⁷ Formal training under a master musician.

of the period refer to soireés featuring both the stars on the same platform.

Recordings of Bablibai made by the Ram-a-Phone music company c. 1907 have come to light in recent years and are available on the Internet. She is credited as “Chanda Karwarkarin” on these records [4]. They reveal a rare musical intelligence matched by a sonorous voice. Towards the end of her life, Bablibai forsook classical singing in favour of spiritual pursuits, curtailing her musical expression to *bhajan*.

The next catalyst in the Goan restoration was the arrival of **Ramkrishnabuwa Vaze** (1871-1945) from Sindhudurg. An acclaimed vocal maestro, composer, scholar, and author, Vazebuwa cut an impressive profile. From his base in Lamgaon near Bicholim, he offered lessons to eager young Goans, among them Kesarbai Kerkar.

With the climate once again conducive to finer pursuits, Goa’s latent musical proclivity was fully awakened, priming the stage for the next generation. In this blossoming milieu were born Kesarbai Kerkar and Mogubai Kurdikar.

An Oral Tradition

Communicating the substance of Indian traditions in a foreign language such as English is fraught with challenges. The first difficulty lies in the absence of equivalent terminology for key concepts, and this inadequacy often has the effect of perverting or trivialising important ideas. A case in point is the Indian notion of *Dharma*, widely and erroneously translated as Religion. The damage is so entrenched that many Indians themselves are unaware of these shortcomings. The task of explaining Indian traditions to the outside world was first undertaken by Westerners, and their

observations were later accepted uncritically by Indians who came to view their own heritage through the distorting lens of the foreigner.

Kabir, the 15th century mystic, illuminates another aspect of the conundrum with his aphorism, मन मस्त हुआ फिर क्या बोले? - When the mind is sated, where is the need to speak?

Indian music is an oral tradition, taught and transmitted without the intermediary of the written word. The foundational idea, Raga⁸, literally means "colour," and in the context of music it is "that which colours the mind." Conveying the totality of this felt experience through words, spoken or written, is a fool's errand.

To overcome this limitation, we seek approximations, and sometimes recruit poetic flourishes and metaphors, to deliver in words what is essentially an aural-emotional payload. Indian sages have long held that true realization is attained only through *manan-chintan*⁹ and *anubhava*¹⁰. The doyen was not wrong who observed: *If you wish to understand a Western philosopher, read what he has written. If you wish to understand an Indian philosopher, look at what he did.*

Yet another difficulty lies in presenting the story of the practitioners themselves. Biographical writing is not a well-developed métier in India. Often the subjects' lives were either never documented or recorded in the barest of outline. Through accretion of legends over years and decades, their stories were embellished, even invented, further blurring fact from fable. Indian tradition has historically placed a premium on *karma*¹¹, not on the personal minutiae of the doer.

⁸ See embedded box.

⁹ Thinking and reflecting on a subject.

¹⁰ Wisdom gained through experience.

¹¹ One's work; the act of doing.

The Trilogy

Until 1961 when the curtain came down on the colonial era, Goans seeking advancement in their lives had no choice but to leave their homeland for Bombay or for foreign shores. During the 20th century, several Goan émigrés tasted the fruits of success in various fields of art. But Goa's crowning achievements were reserved for music. In this elite pool of the distinguished, three women stood out for their sovereign triumphs.

Kesarbai Kerkar (1892-1977) - *Primus inter pares*

Conferring the title Surashree¹² on Kesarbai in 1938, Rabindranath Tagore was fulsome in his praise [5]:

I consider myself fortunate in securing a chance for listening to Kesarbai's singing which is an artistic phenomenon of exquisite perfection... The magic of her voice with the mystery of its varied modulations has repeatedly proved its true significance not in any pedantic display of technical subtleties mechanically accurate, but in the revelation of the miracle of music only possible for a born genius.

The "exquisite perfection" was a culmination of three decades of grinding *sadhana*¹³ and self-denial.

Keri is the archetypal hinterland Goan village. Ringed by hills, fortified by forests, graced by temples, and soothed by birdsong, it clings to the zeitgeist of a Goa that is fast disappearing. At the turn of the 19th century, social and cultural life in this bucolic setting revolved around the village

¹² Empress of melody.

¹³ Disciplined effort.

temple. Kesarbai was born here in 1892 into a family belonging to the Kalavant community, today known as Gomantak Maratha Samaj.

From a very young age, Kesarbai was drawn to the devotional music she heard in nearby temples such as Mangeshi. When she was 8 years old, her mother and uncle took her to Kolhapur where the pre-eminent vocalist **Abdul Karim Khan**, founder of the Kirana gharana, was based. Within a few months, however, the peripatetic ustad relocated, forcing Kesarbai to discontinue her education and move back home. Fortunately, Vazebuwa had set shop in Goa at the time and for a while, Kesarbai sought his tutelage. At age 16 she left for Bombay, inspired by the musical exploits of Bablibai Salgaonkar. Initially she took *taleem* from Barkatullah Khan, a leading sitar player of the day, until the *ustad* folded his tent and moved away. Fortune smiled on Kesarbai when she was accepted by **Alladiya Khansaheb** (1855-1946), founder of the Atrauli-Jaipur gharana.

Unfortunately, the stint with Alladiya Khan quickly came to grief. The exacting *gayaki*¹⁴ of Khansaheb proved far too challenging for the ingenue. When Kesarbai struggled to grasp his vocal lessons, an annoyed Khansaheb lost patience and declared the intricacies of his music to be outside her ken. He packed up and went to Kolhapur to recuperate from health issues, dealing another setback to Kesarbai.

A brief introduction to Alladiya Khan is in order. Founder of the Atrauli-Jaipur gharana, the outré school within the Hindustani stream, he was already a titan by the time Kesarbai crossed his path. The honorific Sangeet Samrat¹⁵ reflected his exalted position in the fraternity of musicians. Brahminical in thought, he had the mien of a *rishi*¹⁶ and the gravitas derived from his stature in the Hindustani canon. On hearing

¹⁴ Vocal signature unique to a musician or a Gharana.

¹⁵ Emperor of melody.

¹⁶ A sage.

Alladiya Khan at a recital, a renowned ustad once exclaimed [7]: "Brother, even my imagination cannot keep up with your voice!"

Until Khansaheb's advent, the performance arc of a Raga had settled into a well-worn groove. It began with the *alap*¹⁷, and proceeded in a linear progression whereby the story was unfolded layer by layer. The tonal threads were then put together to bring the entire edifice into view.

Breaking away from tradition, Alladiya Khan conceived a novel approach. His opening gambit was to nail his tonal colours to the mast; the plot of the Raga was given away upfront. He then guided the listener through the 'Ragascape,' illuminating the peaks and valleys with carefully crafted melodic phrases wrapped around the rhythm of the tala¹⁸. The patterns were of intricate design but - this was Alladiya Khansaheb's signal accomplishment - also euphonious. This audacious top-down approach to Raga was a breach of the prevailing protocol. Khansaheb was akin to a wholesale dealer of melody, not a retail merchant. In keeping with his novel vision, he imbued older Ragas with a fresh reveal and composed new, complex ones.

Throughout history, original minds have faced fierce resistance¹⁹ to their disruptive ideas and it was no different in the case of Alladiya Khansaheb who had to fend off criticism from the old guard.

We return to Kesarbai.

After the dispiriting rejection by Alladiya Khansaheb, Kesarbai turned to **Bhaskarbuwa Bakhale** (1869-1922), a leading light in the Hindustani universe. However, within a few months the great man shifted to Pune,

¹⁷ Measured, free-form development of tonal phrases.

¹⁸ Rhythmic cycle in Indian Classical Music.

¹⁹ Reminds me of a quote of Einstein: "Great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds..."

and once again Kesarbai found herself bereft. She had cycled through multiple teachers for over a decade and had little to show for it. A distraught Kesarbai saw her musical hopes recede, but even in his difficult situation she never let go of her steely resolve. Go big or go home was her vow! In her own words [6]:

I sensed that [Alladiya Khan's] music had some exceptional qualities. Besides, even celebrated musicians of the time were dazzled by his learning and gayaki. So I decided that, if I had to learn music, I would go to him and no one else.

With her back to the wall, the situation had begun to exact an emotional and physical toll. In a desperate attempt, her patron in Bombay pleaded with Khansaheb to give her another chance. With great reluctance Khansaheb agreed, but not before laying down a number of conditions (calculated to dissuade Kesarbai) that included a monthly tuition fee and a punishing schedule of *riyaz*²⁰.

In 1921 Kesarbai resumed her *taleem* under Alladiya Khan and quickly demonstrated her seriousness of purpose. Perceiving the intensity of his pupil, Khansaheb's misgivings melted away and he immersed himself in the task of teaching her. Through 15 years of sweat and toil, Kesarbai absorbed the nectar from Khansaheb's wellspring to emerge as a vocalist of exceptional power. The long guru-shisya²¹ relationship of Khansaheb and Kesarbai is among the most consequential in the history of Hindustani music.

There was no looking back now for Kesarbai. Her supremacy in the vocal arts was acknowledged throughout the nation. Alladiya Khansaheb took enormous pride in her success, for it represented the apotheosis of his labours as well. Shortly before he passed away in 1946, remorseful that

²⁰ A systematic regimen of practice.

²¹ Ancient Indian tradition of Preceptor and Student.

she had not exhausted his fund of knowledge, his moving words to Kesarbai were: "Daughter, you did not empty my belly one little bit."

Truly, Ars longa, vita brevis.

With Kesarbai there were no half-measures. Throughout her musical career she never compromised the high standards she had imposed on herself. In 1963, sensing that she could no longer give of her best, she announced her withdrawal from the performance stage.

Her final years were plagued by ill-health but her spirit remained undefeated [5]:

I am ready for the final journey. I have no regrets. I have the satisfaction of a good job well done. For 70 years I have sung for the Gods, and if, incidentally, I have also delighted the Indian people, I am doubly happy.

The first **Kesarbai Kerkar Samaroh** was held in 1978, a year after her demise, at the Kala Academy auditorium, then located near the Junta House in Panjim. The festival kicked off with an introduction by the distinguished Marathi polyglot, P.L. Deshpande, and a performance by Kesarbai's sole pupil, Dhondutai Kulkarni. Barely in my teens at the time, I retain fond memories of the event.

No account of Kesarbai would be complete without a remark on her personality. A mercurial temperament bordering on the imperious, she fiercely defended what she believed was her due. One unfortunate consequence of her stubborn nature is that she left behind few commercial recordings. After a disagreement with an executive of the HMV recording company, she refused to step into their studios ever again.

Mogubai Kurdikar (1904-2001) - *Gana Tapaswini*²²

In *Between Two Tanpuras* [7], the musician and author Vamanrao Deshpande gets to the core of Mogubai's persona:

There is a type of devotee who renounces heaven itself, preferring instead the pure joy of an austere search. Mogubai's music bears the mark of this kind of austerity.

Like Kesarbai, Mogubai's journey in the pursuit of music was difficult, impelling her through a long vale of blood, sweat, and tears. Mogubai was born in the hamlet of Kurdi near Sanguem. Today the village lies submerged in water most of the year, a fallout of the dam built in the 1970s.

Mogubai's musical initiation took place at the age of seven when her mother, Jayashreebai, took her to a Haridas at a nearby temple. After the wandering bard left, Jayashreebai signed up with a local drama company, Chandreshwar Bhootnath Sangeet Mandali, where a young Mogubai was recruited to play a part in the musicals. Tragedy struck when Jayashreebai took ill. She entrusted Mogubai in the care of a village elder, Balkrishna Parvatkar, and made it known before her final breath that Mogubai should aspire to greatness in vocal music.

The drama company was soon riven by internal politics and folded. Mogubai then joined another drama company, one composed wholly of women. Concurrent with her work with the drama company, she made productive use of her time by training in *natyasangeet*²³ and dance. After a disagreement with the management of the drama company forced her to leave the job, Mogubai found herself at a crossroads. The uncertain situation told on her health, and to seek relief she moved to Sangli in

²² Female ascetic wedded to music.

²³ Genre of vocal music in Marathi drama.

Maharashtra where she began lessons under Inayat Khan. The training came to an abrupt end when the *ustad* quit on her. Setbacks were now becoming a recurring feature in young Mogu's life.

Then a ray of providence filtered through the clouds. Alladiya Khansaheb had also repaired to Sangli to seek treatment for his health issues. Every day as he walked past Mogubai's living quarters, he heard a female voice engaged in practice. His curiosity piqued, one day he decided to take a closer look [2] [8].

One evening as she sat rehearsing a musical phrase she had learnt from Inayat Khan, completely absorbed, her spell was broken by a noise that appeared to come from the doorway. She opened her eyes and there stood before her an elderly person with the looks of a yogi, a huge white moustache and wearing a pink turban. Her fingers lay still on the tanpura and her face took on a quizzical expression. Before she could speak, he said, taking a step forward, "Please continue your riyaz. I listen to your singing everyday. Today, I came to see you in person." To Mogubai, his overall personality suggested only that he was probably a famous singer. Little did she know that he was a reigning monarch in the world of music. She comprehended just how great he was, when she attended a function at the residence of Abasaheb Saambaare. He was on the dais, ready to sing, and she observed how some very eminent people bowed to him in respect. She was astounded.

Mogubai could scarcely believe her fortune when Alladiya Khan accepted her as his disciple. This was her golden chute into the fount of music. Her *taleem* with Alladiya Khansaheb lasted over a year before he moved back to Bombay.

Mogubai was once again in a bind. Overcoming all odds, she followed Khansaheb to Bombay to continue her *taleem* but the arrangement was

short-lived. The coterie of musicians in Bombay was a hotbed of intrigue, and pressure was exerted on Khansaheb to abandon Mogubai's training. Distressed by the reversal, Mogubai sought taleem from the *ustads* of Agra gharana. This turn of events greatly perturbed Alladiya Khansaheb for he had worked diligently to sculpt Mogubai's voice. He worried about the adverse effects of switching horses in midstream. As a compromise, he deputed his brother Hyder Khan in his stead. Petty politics trumped once again, however, and Hyder Khan was forced out of town.

This brief account can scarcely do justice to the upheavals that roiled Mogubai in the prime of her life. That she not only withstood the unrelenting tumult but emerged from it burnished is a testament to her purity of spirit and strength of character.

Mogubai's story has a happy ending. The tide eventually turned when Alladiya Khan returned to her. The rigorous taleem and discipline the great man imposed transformed Mogubai into a vocalist extraordinaire, the likes of whom are few and far between. In a final seal of approval, Alladiya Khansaheb deemed her, together with Kesarbai, the definitive heirs to his musical legacy.

Kishori Amonkar (1932-2017) - *L'enfant terrible*

Born to Mogubai, Kishori grew up in relative comfort under the sheltering warmth of her mother. She imbibed her first music lessons literally in the womb when Mogubai was taking taleem from Alladiya Khan. Kishori's story is not one of years of uphill struggle, physical dislocation, and torment in the pursuit of music. With a great musician for a mother and her own keen nous, the ingredients for success were already in place. In matters of music Mogubai brooked no slack. Her approach to Kishori's training combined maternal love with the firmness of a disciplinarian.

As her singing matured, Kishori sought the wisdom of other gurus such as Anwar Hussain Khan of Agra gharana, and fellow Goan Anjanibai Malpekar. Her searching mind never lost an opportunity to expand her horizons and purchase new perspectives to meld into her own music.

Kishori also dipped her toes into genres removed from classical music, much to the chagrin of her purist mother. The celebrated title song in the movie *Geet Gaya Pattharon Ne* discloses her adaptability to the lighter forms. Kishori came close to being seduced by the beguiling world of film music but the notion was abandoned and the prodigal daughter returned home to a much relieved Mogubai.

In the early stages of her musical career, Kishori, by and large, followed the template of her gharana, but as the years went by, her gayaki evolved. It was still beholden to the fundamentals of the Atrauli-Jaipur school but now exuded an emotive flavour all her own.

Mogubai lent support not only in matters of music but also on the home front. She tended to Kishori's two sons, thus freeing Kishori to pursue music unburdened by domestic concerns. After Kesarbai and Mogubai vacated the performance arena, Kishori became the de facto high priestess of Hindustani vocal, a role she discharged with éclat until her passing in 2017.

As enjoined in the *shastras*,²⁴ Kishoritai regarded music as a vehicle for spiritual progress. She developed a rich inner life and was diligent about her worship; the shrine to Hindu gods in her home was her sanctuary.

Kishori acquired a reputation for being difficult and legion are the stories of her impertinence. Some aspects of her personality evoked her Goan roots. She maintained strong ties to Goa and often retreated to her

²⁴ Works of sacred or traditional knowledge.

husband's ancestral home in Mashel. She took a keen interest in the upkeep of the family temples in Kurdi that were so dear to Mogubai.

A personal anecdote illustrates Kishoritai's volatile temperament. Around the year 2000, I toyed with the proposal of recording her thoughts on various aspects of music and called her from California to pitch the idea. I was prepared for a surly reaction, and sure enough, she was summarily dismissive. She wasn't, however, prepared for my forceful pushback. When it became obvious that I wasn't going to be bullied, she made a quick turnabout. "*Aami Goenkar xapoter nhai re!*,"²⁵ she exclaimed and her tone mellowed. What followed was a very pleasant conversation. To my lasting regret, I did not follow up on the idea.

Daughters of God

Acquiring mastery in the *gayaki* of Atrauli-Jaipur is no mean feat for any aspiring musician. So stringent were Alladiya Khansaheb's standards that merely passing muster in his eyes would suffice to induct you into the Hall of Fame. Kesarbai, Mogubai, and Kishoritai did much more than pass muster. They stretched themselves to the extreme, profoundly enlarging the envelope of musicianship in the vocal sphere.

Mediocrity, a wit observed, sweats blood and produces rubbish. This raises the question: what happens when genius sweats blood? The answer is, you get a Kesarbai or a Mogubai. Revealed in their art are the wondrous possibilities of the human voice taken to its physical and aesthetic limits. It is entirely fitting that today, Kesarbai's voice is coasting in the far reaches of interstellar space, pressed on the Voyager Golden Record aboard NASA's Voyager spacecraft launched in 1977. Kesarbai's recording in Raga Bhairavi was selected as the exemplar of India's music in a collection

²⁵ "We Goans are an insolent lot, aren't we?"

representing the noblest products of the human race. It is at once uplifting and stupefying to think that a voice originating in tiny Goa could one day be intercepted by an advanced alien civilisation in the immense beyond.

Taking stock of Kesarbai's extraordinary artistry runs the risk of setting sail in the seas of hagiography. I cut my teeth on her records and grew up hearing my father speak of the magisterial beauty and dignity of her music.

What do we mean by beauty?

Notions of beauty are different across cultures with no single universal standard. Nonetheless some observations may have wider applicability. In an expansive lecture [9], the Indian astrophysicist S. Chandrasekhar recalled Heisenberg's view on the topic...

Beauty is the proper conformity of the parts to one another and to the whole.

...and then offered his own:

Beauty is that to which the human mind responds at its deepest and most profound.

We are also reminded of the Hindu aphorism, *Satyam Shivam Sundaram*: That which is True is Divine, That which is Divine is Beautiful.

Implicit in these apothegms is a key attribute of beauty: simplicity.

Kesarbai's *gayaki* presents an apparent paradox. It reveals a complexity in the underlying design but her execution belies this intricacy. The *rasika*²⁶ is moved not by the recondite formulation but by the power of *swara*²⁷. The

²⁶ One who takes delight in the music (listener).

²⁷ See embedded box.

joy of Kesarbai lies in seeing her thread this needle: adhering to the formalism of Raga without sacrificing its inherent melodic essence. Backed by tremendous breath control, her voice could ply felicitously across a wide range with no degradation in tonal quality or strength. Her vocal brush had the same quality seen in a master artist at work spontaneously reifying his canvas.

Much of what has been said above of Kesarbai's *gayaki* carries over to Mogubai. They were evenly matched in *taiyyari*²⁸ and depth of repertoire. But there were differences, reflecting the *taleem* Alladiya Khansaheb had customised for each of them.

Kesarbai's was a stentorian voice, bending to her will, certitude attending her delivery. Mogubai's tonal stride was softer, informed by subtle inflection. Whereas Kesarbai exhibited precision and sharpness in her flights of melody, Mogubai traced *rondure* contours. If Kesarbai was a shower of pearls, Mogubai was a drift of petals.

Mogubai possessed a keen grasp of rhythm. Her early training in dance as well as association with **Khaprumama Parvatkar** (we'll meet him shortly) had given her an edge over Kesarbai in this area. Mogubai nurtured a large group of disciples whereas Kesarbai disdained teaching and left behind just one pupil.

Mogubai was every bit Kesarbai's equal in music but their personalities could not have been more divergent. Mogubai's maternal instincts embraced all who came into her fold. She was a traditionalist to the core, caring little for public adulation or commercial success. Shy of the limelight and uncomfortable with the trappings of fame, Mogubai was content performing for the connoisseur or giving *taleem* to her disciples. Obversely, Kesarbai felt at home in the company of the elites, and performed in grand venues and palaces.

²⁸ Preparedness and virtuosity.

Where does Kishoritai fit in this Trilogy?

One way to approach this question is to think of a line representing the ethos of music. At one end of the line we fix Classicism, at the other end, Romanticism. Kesarbai and Mogubai were thoroughbred Classicists whereas Kishori placed more towards the Romantic end of the continuum.

Vamanrao Deshpande has clarified the terms [7]:

The principal feature of romanticism is the preference for emotional expression and relative indifference to structural aspects. The identifying features of classicism are the grace and shapeliness of the tonal picture, the arrangement of rhythmic cycles in such a way that each one is more effective than its predecessor...A classical piece is like a sculpture erected on the stream of time in which form and content are inseparable. On the other hand romantic music strives to express different human emotions through...loose structural design...

Let's not, however, get carried away by this picture. Kishori did not entirely forsake Classicism. With feet firmly grounded in her Atrauli-Jaipur home and the imagination allowed free rein, her *gayaki* came to be a synthesis of both the worlds.

Mogubai and Kesarbai were wrung out of trying circumstances, much of their youthful energies spent in keeping body and soul together for the sake of their art. Kishori's more fortunate condition allowed her the emotional space to master the praxis as well as delve into the intellectual

underpinnings of music. Ancient Indian theories on *Rasa*²⁹ absorbed her attention.

Recording technology in India was in its infancy during the heyday of Kesarbai and Mogubai. Their available recordings scarcely do them justice.

Kishoritai has been recorded extensively and her oeuvre provides a good measure of her artistry. Among commercially available recordings, I would be remiss if I did not mention her *pièce de résistance*, Raga Bhoopali. A soul-shifting example of musical genius, upon Kishori's numinous Bhoopali no human hand can improve.

In a 1912 letter to his mentor Bertrand Russell, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein described Beethoven and Mozart as "the actual sons of God." **Kesarbai Kerkar, Mogubai Kurdikar, and Kishoritai Amonkar** stand as tall as the Himalayas and their names are permanently inscribed in the sanctum sanctorum of India's musical consciousness. They represent the *ne plus ultra* in music. In Goa we like to think of them as the "daughters of God."

The Dazzling Sun of Rhythm³⁰: Khaprumama Parvatkar

Among the refrains that filled my childhood days were the paeans sung to Goa's musical deities by my elders. Four were marked out for special worship, their achievements inviting an excess of fervour: Kesarbai Kerkar, Mogubai Kurdikar, Dinanath Mangeshkar, and Khaprumama Parvatkar. In this pantheon, Khaprumama's name often broke ranks to be further elevated.

²⁹ Literally, juice or essence. An element of Indian aesthetics.

³⁰ Refers to his honorific, LayaBhaskar.

Some of these admirers, now long deceased, had been associated with Khaprumama. Few could have appreciated the nuances of *laya*³¹ or even the extent of his stupendous mastery of *laya-shastra*³², but they were united in their recognition that a giant had walked among them and that they were blessed to have made his acquaintance.

Khaprumama, born in 1879 in Parvat near the village of Paroda, devoted his entire life to *laya-shastra* – the theory and technique of tempo, its subdivisions, and rhythm. The propositions in this field are simple enough to state but their solution rapidly moves into very difficult territory. An analogue is found in the realm of pure mathematics, Number Theory in particular, where the statement of propositions is facile but their solution outside the ken of all but the most gifted mathematicians.

What distinguished Khaprumama over and above his other accomplishments in *tala-shastra* was his ability to simultaneously hold multiple lines of rhythmic cycles in his mind and synchronize them in any manner he chose. In the Western classical tradition, Johann Sebastian Bach displayed a similar faculty for multiple melodic lines.

Two decades ago my friend, Dr. Ajay Nerurkar, translated an article on Khaprumama, originally written in Marathi by **Gopalkrishna Bhobe**. The rendered version is available in full on my website [8]. A writer, music connoisseur, and playwright, Gopalkrishna-bab was a man of many talents and hailed from Nerul.

From *Kalaatm Gomantak* by Gopalkrishna Bhobe [2], translated by Dr. Ajay Nerurkar:

Not too long ago, in Goa there lived a person who had not only touched the core of laya but had achieved a sort of

³¹ Tempo and time in music.

³² Shastra: science, technique, scripture, depending on the context.

enlightenment in this art. He immersed himself in the acquisition of this divine learning and as a result was able to grasp tala in its entirety. This ascetic-musician could have gained the immortality of an Amir Khusro, a Tansen, a Sadarang or a Pakhawaji Bhagwandas had he been in the court of an aesthete ruler in an earlier age. A university would have been built around his work, volumes written on his discoveries. These books would then have become the Word of God to future generations.

His name was "LayaBrahmaBhaskar" Khapruji Parvatkar. To his dying day, Khapruji devoted himself to the study of laya, unencumbered by any triumphal ambition. The only opponent he wanted to subdue was the power of laya. In the process every part of his body had imbibe rhythm, as it were. Much as a sadhu would teach theology to his disciples by peeling away the skin to reveal what lay inside, Khapruji brought the science of laya under control and then simplified its most unfriendly aspects so that everyone could comprehend the substance of this profound body of knowledge...

...Khaprumama was born around 1878-79 [in Parvat near the village of Paroda]. His given name was Lakshman. However, his mother lovingly called him Khapru and this name stuck. In the early years of his life, Khaprumama used to play the sarangi. The Kalavant community of Parvat filled their days with music and dance...

...While learning to play the tabla the young boy wondered why, when a tempo can be speeded up twice, thrice or four times, it should not be possible to achieve a fractional speed-up. On asking elders about this, he was told to not concern himself with such matters and concentrate on the straight and the narrow instead. But this did not satisfy Khaprumama's

searching mind. He began to research and found himself so rivetted by this new field of study that this was all he did all day long. He forgot himself. Immersed in laya, he spent days, weeks and even months pondering over knotty questions of tala-shastra and theorizing about them...

In 1921, Khaprumama's rendering of various aspects of layakari regaled all those present at a mehfil organised by Pt. Bhaskarbuwa Bakhale. Panditji himself commended him with the words : "Khapruji, you reign supreme in layashastra".

In 1933, Bombay was the site of a mammoth mehfil. SangeetSamrat Khansaheb Alladiya Khan, Khansaheb Vilayat Husain Khan, Aaftaab-e-Mousiqui Faiyyaz Khan and other well-known vocalists, instrumentalists and tabla players had gathered. Some of the tabaliyas casually challenged Khaprumama to "produce a theka of thirteen beats and play it at the tempo of a twelve beat theka".

Khaprumama had privately done hundreds of such tricks. He did not find this much of a challenge at all. He not only built a thirteen matra theka but also topped it off with a tiha'i. The tabaliyas who had intended to poke fun at him were astonished. Even Alladiya Khan couldn't contain himself. Overcome with emotion, he exclaimed, "Good Lord ! I bow my head a hundred times before your learning."

At another such mehfil Khansaheb Aman Ali blurted out, "Amaa, my entire existence shall henceforth revolve around your laya". Khaprumama had produced a composition having a tiha'i with three dha's around a theka of 13.5 beats. A Hyderabad tabaliya there fell at the feet of Khaprumama with tears in his eyes.

In 1935, Mogubai Kurdikar had a statue made of him and ceremonially handed it to Khaprumama. On this occasion some distinguished ustads from Hyderabad, after analysing his mastery over laya, honoured Khaprumama with the title "The Shining Sun of Laya". Later, in 1939 artistes from Bombay feted him in what was a celebration of a lifetime's devotion to music. It was a celebration graced by the presence of the SangeetSamrat himself. Khansaheb Alladiya Khan presented him with the title "LayaBrahmaBhaskar." At a small function in his home-state of Goa, music lovers decorated him with the title "TalaKanthaMani" (The glittering jewel in the crown of tala).

In the late 1970s, the Kala Academy in Panjim was fortunate to have on its faculty the late Tabla maestro, Taranath Rao Hattangady. It belongs to my cherished memories the many stories of Khaprumama he told my brother and me, demonstrating the puzzles Khaprumama had posed and solved in the field of laya.

So consummate was Khaprumama's supremacy over rhythm that he once went head to head with a machine and held his own. The story is recounted in the book, *Pillars of Hindustani Music* by Prof. B.R. Deodhar [6].

... Each tabala player proceeded to demonstrate by clapping what was enjoined by his particular tradition. Several minutes passed but there was no sign of the discussion coming to an end. I was wondering how best to put a stop to the wrangling. An idea struck me. I respectfully said to them, "You are all experts in your field but I have one small doubt. You are clapping out the beats and reciting the bols of your tala. Would they synchronize perfectly with the metronome?" Some of the tabala players indignantly said, "Do you take us for some half-baked tabala players? Bring along your metronome and see

whether we keep pace with it." I sent for the metronome, wound it up and set it in the rhythm they indicated. Each tabala player proceeded to clap out the tala while reciting the bols. But they themselves noticed that within a few minutes the strokes of the metronome and their clapping were not perfectly synchronized. When the expert tabala players discovered that they were not able to stick to their rhythm and recite the bols accurately when measured against the instrument, they began to retrace their steps to the auditorium one by one. Only Khaprumama stayed behind. I placed the metronome before him. He said, "Others could not manage it. Let me try it." He, like the others, started clapping out the rhythm and reciting the bols. He went on doing it for two or three minutes but there was not the slightest lack of synchronization between his claps and the strokes of the metronome. I tried to run the instrument faster, then slower but Khaprumama's timing and the strokes of the metronome were identical. It was an amazing demonstration of his mastery of rhythm!...

In 2001 I requested the world-renowned musician and Sitar maestro, **Ravi Shankar**, to collect his thoughts on Khaprumama. His short tribute is archived on my website [8] and part of it is transcribed below.

Ravi Shankar on Khaprumama (from the Rajan Parrikar Music Archive at www.parrikar.org):

It was in the mid-1940s that I first met and came to know Mama Khapru of Goa. My friend the wonderful tabla player and teacher Taranath Hattangady was the one who got us together. I had already known about Khapruji as a pakhawaj player but more about his layakari and his ginatkari or the tremendous

command over the calculative approach of laya (tempo) and talas (rhythmic cycles). I even had heard a 78 rpm three and a half minutes record of his, where against a naghma or lehera played in sarangi playing teentala of 16 beats, he first counted the numbers ranging from 9 to 15 and recited a short pakhawaj bol composition for each of these numbers. Hearing this record I had marveled at his uncanny control and ability to do this...

...I found Khapruji, maybe in his 70s then, to be a sweet-natured very simple old man without any air of being such a unique musician. Out of 3 or 4 times that I saw him, he was once in my recital at some music circle in Bombay sitting in the front. Boy, was I nervous that evening! But I was rewarded afterwards by his appreciation and blessing. In the other meetings I remember having requested him to recite some bandishes and complicated countings. He lighted up and I heard some mind-boggling complex drum compositions orally from him. He always was counting new ones even in his sleep...

...Like some of the very great musicians I have met in my life I will always cherish the memory of this astounding person, Mama Khapru.

Today Khaprumama is all but forgotten. An occupational hazard for an exponent in the oral tradition, he left behind not a single publication that could attest to his extraordinary ability. No critical mass of students evolved to extend and propagate his pioneering contributions. When his mortal remains were consigned to flames, so was his lifetime's work, a library burned down in one fell swoop.

A few recordings of Khaprumama are archived in [8]. It is the only memorial we have for the preternatural achievements of this rara avis.

Honourable Mention

This section includes bite-sized sketches of four Goan musicians with strengths and specialities in disparate areas, evidencing the width of the Goan footprint in the Hindustani realm.

Anjanibai Malpekar (1883-1974)

Ensclosed in the hamlet of Malpem in North Goa is a little-known gem: an old temple of Lord Mulvir bearing delicate, weathered Kaavi art (sgraffito). Anjanibai Malpekar, as her last name indicates, was born in this village into a family of musicians. Her mother, Nabubai, was a respected singer and so was her grandfather, Vasudev Malpekar.

Anjanibai became a student of **Nazir Khan**, co-founder of the Bhendibazar gharana, named after the Bombay neighbourhood where the founding ustads based themselves after relocating from Rampur. After years of rigorous taleem supplemented by her native intelligence, Anjanibai developed into a vocalist of exceptional fluency and depth. Her singing was characterised by graceful tonal curves known in the trade as meend. She also acquired a wide repertoire of traditional compositions from her ustad.

Unlike other musicians of the day who were satisfied to stay within the ambit of performance, Anjanibai sought to understand the underlying shastra. In this effort, she was fortunate to observe from close quarters the

collaboration between the legendary shastrakara³³ and vaggeyekara³⁴, Pandit Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande, and the ustads of her gharana. Pandit Bhatkhande was then in the thick of his researches in music, and as a 'fly on the wall,' Anjanibai benefitted from the ongoing dialogue.

In 1899 she married Vasanji Bhagwandas Ved, a merchant from Bombay, and an admirer of her music.

One quality set Anjanibai apart from all the other musicians: her singular physical beauty. Enchanted by her fetching visage, all manner of creatives vied for her attention, including some of India's greatest artists. She was Raja Ravi Varma's muse in several of his paintings such as Ladies in the Moonlight, The Heartbroken, and Mohini.

Anjanibai's exquisite looks, however, turned out to be a curse, for all too often, the luscious inadvertently attracts the gaze of the lascivious. Exhausted by having to fend off the constant advances, Anjanibai decided to pack it in and abruptly cut short her concert career. At the peak of her performing years she retreated inward, and sought guidance from her spiritual guru, Narayan Maharaj of Kedgaon. Fortunately, she continued to mentor musicians, among them, Kishori Amonkar, Kumar Gandharva, and the "Queen of Ghazal" Begum Akhtar.

Anjanibai Malpekar passed away in Bombay on August 7, 1974.

³³ Scholar of traditional science and technique.

³⁴ Music composer, researcher, and scholar.

Sridhar Parsekar (1920-1964)

Bucolic Parsem in north Goa remains frozen in time, its echt-Goan character and spirit intact. The village is proud of its quirky heritage: the unusual façade of the ancient temple of Goddess Bhagwati, the nearby banyan tree said to be the largest in Goa, the magnificent ancient sculptures of Brahma and Vishnu, and so on.

For an obscure place, Parsem boasts world-class achievements. The all-women's professional theatre company formed here in 1917 was among the earliest of its kind. Sridhar Parsekar, widely considered the greatest violinist in Hindustani music in the 20th century, was born in the shadow of the Bhagwati temple.

Parsekar was a musician and composer of the highest class. He was trained in the violin by the maestro, Gajananrao Joshi. Unfortunately, his life was one of tragedy wrought by a wanton love of alcohol. That dissolute habit exacted a heavy price from him, drawing and quartering every ounce of his mind, body, and spirit.

Sridhar Parsekar died in 1964 at the age of 44.

The villagers of his birthplace Parsem have not forgotten him; a classical music festival is celebrated in his name every year. Recordings as well as additional biographical details are archived in the **Vijaya Parrikar Library** on my website [8].

A couple of decades ago, at my request, **Ravi Shankar** shared his memories of Sridhar-bab [8]:

I knew Sridhar. He was a wonderful violinist, a disciple of Gajananrao Joshi. Sridhar Parsekar was a staff artist at AIR Bombay when Alla Rakha was also a staff member there. This is the period I knew him in the early forties. He was a smart

young fellow, dark and very good looking. He came to hear me a lot and I also heard him a lot. I played one duet with him as I did with his Guru in the late 40's in Bombay. It was a wonderful duet I played with him and Alla Rakha accompanied us. Along with many other musicians Kishen Maharaj was sitting in the front. I admired him as a musician and I have always felt very sad how he ruined his life and killed himself with his addiction to alcohol.

Madhukar Pednekar (1916-1967)

An European import, the harmonium is considered an ersatz instrument in Indian classical music, with good reason. Its discrete keys are incapable of effectively reproducing the subtle curves and glides of swara that lie at the heart of Indian musical expression. Nevertheless, since the beginning of the 20th century, the harmonium has been widely adopted for vocal accompaniment not only in classical music but also in genres such as Marathi natyasangeet and bhajan.

While it is facile to get started on the harmonium, mastery over this instrument is an entirely different story. It takes an unusually high degree of felicity to hold the listener's attention in a solo performance on the harmonium. In the hands of a master though, it can inspire awe and joy. Goa has produced many formidable harmonium masters such as Mohanlal Ramnathkar, Vitthalrao Korgaonkar, Vasantrya Amonkar, Ratnakant Ramnathkar, but one name stands head and shoulders above all: Madhukar Pednekar.

Madhukar was born in Bombay in a family with roots in the Goan village of Malpem (the same village as Anjanibai's). Since Malpem is located in the Pednem area of north Goa, Madhukar was referred to as 'Pednekar' as well as 'Malpekar.'

Pednekar took his primary training in harmonium from Annasaheb Mainkar of Sangli. Mainkar also composed music for cinema and Pednekar served as his apprentice in a number of films [10]. After absorbing all that Mainkar had to offer, Madhukar took flight on his own. He was a true swayambhu³⁵. He established such a dominion over the instrument that the harmonium became an extension of his being. Pednekar came to be regarded not so much a musician but as a magician. Never before had anyone seen his combination of grace, dexterity, and agility in fingering technique. Recordings of Madhukar Pednekar are archived at [8].

Pednekar left behind several students, prominent among them a fellow Goan, Tulsidas Borkar (1934-2018).

Jitendra Abhisheki (1932-1998)

The tiny ward Mangeshi in the village of Priol takes its name after Mangesh, an epithet of Lord Shiva. It is known for its iconic, eponymous temple. Mangeshi's cachet does not derive solely from its historical and religious significance. It has long nourished aspirants in music and dance.

Dinanath Mangeshkar was born here and grew up around the temple courtyard. His daughters Lata and Asha are known worldwide. As we saw earlier, Kesarbai Kerkar's earliest stirrings in music can be traced to the bhajans she absorbed in Mangeshi as a child.

Jitendra Abhisheki was born in Mangeshi in a family of priests charged with officiating at the temple. Abhisheki's father, Balubuwa, was a pandit³⁶ and a keertankar³⁷ who passed on his love of Sanskrit and music to the young Jitendra.

³⁵ Self-made; something that self-reveals.

³⁶ Temple priest; also means a learned man.

³⁷ A performer of keertan, songs in praise of God.

Abhisheki's formal instruction in music began under Girijabai Kelekar from the neighbouring village of Bandoda (sister of Jyotsna Bhole, the famous Marathi stage singer and actress). After imbibing the essentials, he left for Bombay to take taleem under Azmat Hussein Khan, a master vocalist affiliated with Agra, Khurja, and Atrauli gharanas.

Abhisheki later enrolled as a disciple of the learned musician and composer, Jagannathbua Purohit "Gunidas." This helped fortify his ragadari³⁸, performance technique, and amass a wealth of musical compositions.

A restless soul and a seeker of all that is sublime and noble in music, Abhisheki's mind was uncontaminated by narrow dogmas. In the 1960s he journeyed to Allahabad, to the home of the cerebral composer-musician Ramashreya Jha "Ramrang." He learnt several of Jha-sahab's compositions directly from the composer and made them a fixture in his concerts. These peregrinations in search of musical pearls was a constant theme in Abhisheki's early life.

Abhisheki ranks among the great composers of the 20th century. His creative oeuvre discloses a versatile mind and an agile imagination. He was singlehandedly responsible for the revival of the Marathi drama in the 1960s and 1970s through his brilliant scores for musicals such as Matsyagandha, Hey Bandh Reshamache, Katyar Kalzat Ghusli, and Yayati Devayani, to name a few. Abhisheki's talent for wrapping melody around the written word is clearly manifest in this body of work. He enjoyed a fruitful collaboration with Goa's very own Bakibab Borkar, lending music to Bakibab's verse.

The consummate nadayogi³⁹ shuffled off this mortal coil on November 7, 1998 in Pune.

³⁸ Grammar and aesthetic of ragas.

³⁹ Practitioner of the yoga of music.

In Conclusion

The roster of Goans of consequence in the world of Indian Classical music is long. Limitations of time and space do not permit a wider inclusion. In no particular order, a few names come to mind, none of them among the living:

Saraswatibai Zambaulikar, Bapu-Tara (sisters Bapu and Tara Velingkar), Ratnakant Ramnathkar, Mohanlal Ramnathkar, Tarabai Shirodkar, Anjanibai Loliengar, Govindrao Agni, Suresh Haldankar, Pandharinath Nageshkar, Menakabai Shirodkar, Vatsalabai Parvatkar, Dattaram Parvatkar, Saraswatibai Phatarpekar, Shobha Gurtu.

It is given to only a handful to soar above the raft of devoted seekers and reach for the stars. But the glorious heights attained by the select few are made possible by the diligence of the many, toiling quietly behind the scenes, often in lonely bylanes, without reward or acclaim.

To the untold who kept the soil watered in Goa's garden of melody, I paraphrase Einstein:

The hands of service must ever be at work, in order that the marble continue to lastingly shine in the sun. To these serving hands [theirs] shall also belong.

Acknowledgement

My wife Veena Parrikar for her help with the editing.

Raga is the fundamental melodic form in Indian Classical Music. The literal meaning of the word in Sanskrit is colour, and in the context of music, **Raga** is that which colours the mind.

The **Raga** is constructed from a smaller unit known as **swara**. A **swara** is not a note - a single frequency tone. Regrettably, **swara** and note are often used interchangeably.

A **swara** takes the note for its building block but is a whole lot more. It is a microcosm of graces and gestures imparted to a note, and its realization depends on intonation, direction of approach, and other **swaras** in its neighbourhood. Significantly, there's a meta aspect to **swara**; it is suffused with 'life' and feeling. The idea of **swara** is fundamental to Indian musical thought and performance.

Raga is neither a scale nor a tune. It may be thought of as a DNA blueprint with instructions for melodic conduct. Every **Raga** deploys a specific set of **swaras**. It is distinguished by its unique tonal molecules, phrases, and patterns made from the **swaras** it admits. These stipulations give rise to the signature of the **Raga**. Within these boundary conditions there is ample freedom for the musician to improvise and give play to the imagination. Compositional forms such as **Dhrupad** and **Khayal** serve as vehicles for expressing **Raga**.

Tala (lit. clap) is the Indian measure of time, the rhythmic counterpart to melody. Compositions in **Dhrupad** and **Khayal** are set to specific **talas**. **Talas** are cyclic, and composed of **matras** (beats) with mnemonic syllables known as **bol**. For instance, the well-known **Teentala** is composed of 16 **matras**.

Gharana refers to a stylistic school within the Hindustani music ecosystem. A **gharana** is distinguished by its set of preferences that includes tonal gestures, manner of voice production, choice and treatment of **Ragas**, compositional repertoire, and so on. The name of a **gharana** usually derives from the geographical origin of its founder(s).

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